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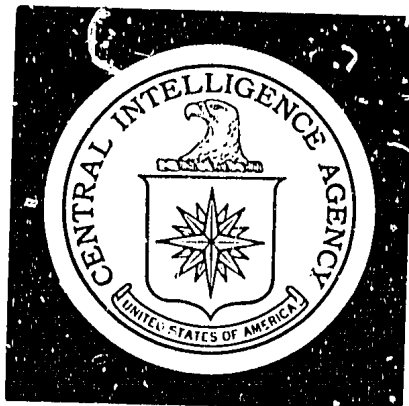
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OFFICE OF
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MEMORANDUM

Taking Stock in Cambodia

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

18 February 1972

MEMORANDUM*

SUBJECT: Taking Stock in Cambodia

Cambodia is showing the strains of the growing military, political and economic pressures of the war. The surge of national spirit and euphoria that followed the coup against Sihanouk in March 1970 has been dampened by the grim realities of casualty lists, refugee movements, and economic strains. The armed forces, while improving, are still no match for the Vietnamese main force units. And buffeted by a succession of military crises, the Lon Nol regime, once strongly unified and stable, has become increasingly unnerved by severe public and private criticism of its performance. As one result, a lessening commitment to the war has been noted in some influential quarters; this could grow, along with the general disillusionment, if the course of the war continues to hold no promise of relief for Cambodia. Further discussion of this proposition begins in paragraph 15.

* This memorandum was prepared by the Office of National Estimates and coordinated within CIA.

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I. THE SITUATION

A. Military Developments

1. The Cambodian Armed Forces (FANK) have shown considerable growth and improvement relative to their pre-war condition as a small and marginally effective rural police and civic action force. In less than two years the original contingent of about 35,000 has been expanded into a wartime force estimated to be about 200,000 men and, with an ongoing training program and heavy American logistical support, is now able to conduct small-scale security operations. FANK's ability to cope with the enemy's low-level harassing and interdiction activities has improved, and it has kept open the major supply lines to the capital most of the time -- albeit with help from the South Vietnamese. Although the government's control is still largely restricted to the larger towns and major lines of communication, the garrison mentality that has limited FANK's offensive capabilities is slowly giving way to a greater willingness to venture into the countryside.

2. Nevertheless, FANK continues to exhibit a number of deficiencies and has fallen well short of realizing

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its combat potential. Despite increased numbers, substantial American air support, and important ARVN assistance on the ground, FANK is still no match for the Vietnamese communist main force units operating in the country. The communists enjoy uncontested control of the northeast and much of the north, and have been able to tie down FANK with a portion of their forces, while many communist units move more or less at will through the countryside. FANK's problems were glaringly evident in the disastrous outcome of the recent operation "Chenla II" -- a Cambodian effort to reopen a portion of Route 6 north of Phnom Penh. In this instance and in others, Lon Nol's repeated interference with normal channels of command complicated efforts to control and coordinate operations. But Lon Nol is not the only problem; FANK suffers from a shortage of competent leaders at all levels. They seem to find it particularly difficult, even at this stage of the game, to use artillery and air support effectively. Excessive casualties have resulted also from a general inability to maneuver and an unwillingness to dig in under fire, although there are signs that at least some units are learning these basics.

3. ARVN assistance has been a vital factor in Cambodia's defenses. Over the past 18 months, the South Vietnamese have often provided effective support east and south of the Mekong, and elsewhere have at least diverted the enemy's full attention from FANK. ARVN's potential for cross-border operations still imposes some restraint on the communists' options, but ARVN's combat role in Cambodia has steadily diminished and its availability in time of need can no longer be taken for granted. Since last spring's rout from their Cambodian base at Snoul, for example, South Vietnamese forces have been increasingly reluctant to move aggressively against the major communist bases in the region north of Tay Ninh Province. This reluctance has grown in recent weeks with the anticipation of a communist spring offensive in South Vietnam itself.

4. At the same time, the communist forces arrayed against FANK have been strengthened. VC/NVA forces have increased in the last 18 months from about 15-20,000 combat troops to an estimated 30-35,000 -- although some units have remained in base areas or focused against the ARVN. There has also been considerable expansion of the indigenous communist apparatus and guerrilla force -- the Khmer Communists (KC). Estimates of KC strength

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vary widely, but a functioning KC apparatus now exists in most and possibly all the Cambodian provinces; it is providing some military, logistical, and administrative support to Hanoi's forces, as well as helping to tie down FANK troops in scattered areas of the country. The KC organization includes a combat force of some 15-30,000, concentrated primarily near the major communist bases in the northeast. The KC forces generally are poorly motivated, poorly trained, and poorly armed, and as yet are no match for regular FANK units. Nonetheless, they present a persistent challenge to government control in the lightly defended countryside, where their armed presence in a village can ensure at least passive support for the communist cause. In sum, the communists in Cambodia have been able to recuperate from their military setbacks of 1970 and to meet most of their priority military objectives in the country.

5. But communist forces have had to cope with some serious problems over the past year or more. They have had to divert substantial forces at times to counter major FANK operations, although generally they have engaged in sustained large-scale combat only when their bases or vital supply corridors seemed threatened, or when

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opportunities existed to administer an occasional sharp blow to keep FANK off balance. And while a viable logistic network has been developed -- capable of supporting a fairly high level of military activity in Cambodia -- communist supply lines to Cambodia's southeastern provinces (adjacent to South Vietnam's delta region) are still threatened by FANK and ARVN.

6. Additionally, the local communist structure has not been able to assume as much of the military burden as Hanoi may have hoped. Popular sympathy for the KC has been limited by the strong ethnic hostility felt toward the Vietnamese, who obviously sponsor the movement. The old-line "Khmer Rouge" insurgents, active dissidents in Sihanouk's era, are not only resentful of the interloping Vietnamese cadre but of the Hanoi-trained Khmer who have returned since 1970 to assume leadership positions in the communist structure. In some areas, Khmer insurgents have maintained a degree of independence from the Vietnamese -- there are bandit gangs which have simply adopted the KC label -- and on occasion, Khmer communist personnel have actually clashed with Viet Cong units over tax collection and the distribution of land

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and supplies. For the most part, however, wherever North Vietnamese troops are present in Cambodia, they seem to be able to maintain Hanoi's control over any recalcitrant Khmer units.

B. Political Slippage

7. The pressures of war have already taken their toll of political unity in Phnom Penh. Marshal Lon Nol is still the focal point of whatever cohesion exists among anti-communist forces in Cambodia; no one else comes close to commanding such widespread acceptance among civilian and military elements. But his somewhat impulsive, at times irrational, manner of governing has created increasing tensions within the governmental hierarchy. These tensions reached crisis proportions when the "Chenla II" operation turned into a debacle. It was widely believed that Lon Nol's personal and often erratic direction of the campaign -- bypassing the FANK General Staff -- contributed significantly to the operation's failure. The subsequent recriminations triggered a rift with Prime Minister Delegate Sirik Matak, who joined several senior military officers in an effort to curb the Marshal's powers -- without appreciable success.

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8. Matak's administrative efficiency and level-headedness have been a useful counterweight to Lon Nol's mystical and often unrealistic appraisal of Cambodian capabilities. But his close relationship with the Marshal, a major stabilizing influence on the political scene for two years, is obviously badly strained. The strain arises in large part from Matak's frustration with Lon Nol's refusal to delegate authority. Matak, though he lacks a strong personal following, would like to be prime minister, or at least have de facto control of the government. Following the Marshal's stroke last spring, Matak was appointed Prime Minister Delegate with the understanding that he would run the day-to-day affairs of the government. As Lon Nol's health improved, however, the Marshal resumed an active role, and Matak found his own powers greatly curtailed. Matak's oft-threatened resignation would not only remove a very capable administrator from the government, but would further narrow its political base. His strong personal loyalty to Lon Nol may continue to dissuade him from such a move.

9. Replacing the Marshal would be very difficult in any case. Despite his failings, he may be the only man capable of maintaining any semblance of political unity in Phnom Penh; his departure could trigger a period

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of intense, even chaotic, political infighting. The potential for such a development was clearly demonstrated by the brief flurry of political maneuvering which followed his stroke. None of the many political hopefuls were able to muster enough support to form a government at that time. The personal loyalty of the bulk of the army was a significant factor in Lon Nol's return to office then, and remains crucial to his political future. This support apparently remains strong despite recent erosion.

10. The Marshal's health also remains a serious question mark despite an apparently good recovery from the stroke. If he should die, however, or become completely incapacitated, Matak would probably lead the government, with the army's concurrence, as he did last year -- at least initially. He might be successful in establishing a tighter and more lasting arrangement with the generals, who have been cool to him in the past, and so enhance his position. Whether he did or not, however, various rival political factions would begin immediately to maneuver for power. In Tam, a prominent civilian politician and President of the Constituent Assembly, obviously has political ambitions, but his support is limited. A likelier candidate would be Son Ngoc Thanh,

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once prime minister of Cambodia, and leader of the Khmers resident in South Vietnam. Thanh is widely respected and could rally some support from the Khmer Krom -- the FANK elements recruited among these people -- as well as from certain leaders of the majority Buddhist sect, the Mohannikay. Thanh's standing with the army as a whole is uncertain, however; there are indications that even his influence with the Khmer Krom may be fading. And Thanh's long association with the South Vietnamese has left a residue of distrust among many Khmer. With army support a necessary prerequisite for political power, a successor to Lon Nol could very well come directly from that quarter, although no military leader has yet emerged as a strong political contender.

11. The army's political influence has become a persistent cause of concern in civilian circles. The politicians tend to hold the military responsible for the shift in 1971 toward more authoritarian government in Phnom Penh. They cite the decision to replace the energetic In Tam with a career military officer as Minister of Interior, and the move to convert the increasingly fractious National Assembly into a relatively toothless Constituent Assembly. (These decisions were indeed a

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reflection of the government's impatience with the constant criticism by In Tam and other civilian politicians of its increasingly unpopular wartime measures.) While the senior military officers have yet to emerge as a cohesive political force, they have become predominant among Lon Nol's advisors, and he appears more and more to identify with their interests. Thus, while overt criticism from the civilian reformists may be subsiding in Phnom Penh, their unhappiness with the drift of political affairs remains. And while the Cambodian military continues to exhibit cohesion and commitment to the war, the Lon Nol government is not able to count on the civilian political support it once took for granted. At the popular level, the frustrations of military defeat, the hardships of daily life and the waning confidence in the government are leading to widespread disillusionment and pessimism. Even in the military, there are those who question the wisdom of continuing the war.

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II. THE PROSPECT

A. Military Trends

12. FANK is now about half way through the current dry season -- traditionally an active period for communist forces -- and its vulnerabilities are many and serious. FANK was discouraged and weakened by the autumn defeat on Route 6, but it does not appear to have used the breathing spell of the past two months to accomplish any significant reorganization or improvements in tactics and morale. Fortunately for FANK, VC/NVA forces in Cambodia now seem preoccupied with South Vietnam. Existing plans for a major communist effort in South Vietnam this dry season would seem to preclude a concurrent offensive of major proportions in Cambodia, and there are as yet no signs of a major buildup that would foreshadow one. The present dry weather, however, allows sufficient maneuverability for the communist units to enable them to apply pressures over widespread areas of Cambodia even with a relatively modest commitment of forces.

13. There has been only a small increase in such pressures in Cambodia in recent weeks. But in the remaining months of the dry season, the communists could

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easily go to greater lengths, cutting lines of communication to Phnom Penh, harassing the capital by sustained rocket and mortar attacks, and conducting terrorism and sabotage within the city as well. At the same time, the communists could -- and probably will -- continue to strengthen their control in the Cambodian countryside and expand their logistics corridors into the delta region of South Vietnam, particularly in the districts east of Phnom Penh. More serious threats to Cambodia would develop if NVA forces moved to invest major towns north of Phnom Penh along Routes 6 and 7 -- e.g., Kompong Cham or Kompong Thom -- or if they become more aggressive in the region of Siem Reap to the west; but such moves appear much less likely in the near term.

14. FANK's ability to respond to a series of widely scattered attacks would be very limited. Spoiling actions seem to be underway at Siem Reap, but in the east where the communists are much stronger, FANK offensives of any size any time soon appear unlikely. At this juncture, the Cambodians are probably content to remain on the defensive around Phnom Penh and other major towns while trying to keep critical supply lines open through the dry season

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and the summer flooding. ARVN will still have some forces available for assisting FANK east and south of the Mekong through the remainder of the year. It is unlikely, however, that anything short of sustained, large-scale ARVN incursions into VC/NVA base areas in Cambodia can prevent a slow deterioration of FANK control in the countryside through 1972.

B. Political Aspects

15. The political leadership in Phnom Penh may no longer be sufficiently stable and decisive to cope with major wartime crises. Another setback on the pattern of "Chenla II", for example, could crack its fragile unity. And while the economy still exhibits the general resilience of an agrarian society, the strains associated with the war would be greatly exacerbated if, for example, supply lines to the cities were cut for prolonged periods. In general, therefore, the military situation seems to be the controlling factor on the Cambodian political scene. Thus, despite the nagging disappointments of continued warfare and the political disarray, so long as Hanoi does not apply very strong military pressures, the Cambodian government will probably be able to muddle through this year.

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16. At the same time, with such obvious limitations on their own ability to affect the course of the war, the Cambodians will grow increasingly sensitive to military and political trends in South Vietnam, and to the attitudes and actions of the US, particularly with regard to prospects for continued military assistance. Indeed, there are already signs in Phnom Penh that some responsible officials entertain serious doubts as to Saigon's staying power and the future of US aid. As early as last summer, these uncertainties led to some tentative feelers to Peking, looking to a way out of the war. The response to date has not been encouraging to Phnom Penh; apparently Peking continues to defer to Hanoi's prior interests in the Indochina area. On the other hand, Soviet officials in Phnom Penh recently have intimated to Cambodian officials that they would be ready to act as intermediaries with Hanoi. (Presumably, the Russians would hope thereby to minimize Chinese influence in Cambodia while ingratiating themselves with the North Vietnamese.) Additionally, Lon Nol has recently sought Indonesian assistance in contacting Hanoi.

17. The terms of an accommodation which would take Cambodia out of the war before the conflict in South Vietnam itself is settled are difficult to visualize.

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Hanoi may feel that in time it can win everything it wants in Cambodia without concessions to any anti-communist regime in Phnom Penh. The key at this time is obviously Hanoi's assessment of the advantages to be gained from any deal. Certainly, returning Cambodia (and FANK) to its pre-1970 passive role in the war would of itself be a psychological victory of major proportions for Hanoi. In the same vein, the North Vietnamese might not feel strongly enough at this juncture to press for a political role for their KC proteges in Phnom Penh. But Hanoi would certainly not settle for anything less than continued de facto control of its northern and northeastern base areas, and for overland access to southeastern Cambodia as well.

18. From Phnom Penh's point of view, communist control of the northern and northeastern bases might be acceptable. Cambodian regimes have never exercised firm control of the sparsely settled regions north of the so-called "Lon Nol line." But the southerly areas, along the South Vietnamese border, are relatively densely settled by ethnic Khmer. And while local accommodations between opposing forces are fairly common in these areas, it would be quite another thing for Phnom Penh to

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acknowledge Vietnamese hegemony over the region -- however "temporary." This would appear to be only the last resort of a thoroughly demoralized Cambodian government.

19. Although pressures in Phnom Penh for negotiations may increase, therefore, it seems unlikely that there will be any settlement between Cambodia and Hanoi in the near future. Hanoi's probable demands, even if it were disposed to negotiate, appear quite unacceptable to any government committed to preservation of the Khmer nation and its territory. And we believe that the Lon Nol-Sirik Matak government is still committed to this goal.

20. But over the longer term, attitudes could change, especially as Cambodian thoughts begin to turn to the prospect of even heavier communist military pressures in the next [1972-1973] dry season. Prospects for driving the communists out of Cambodia by military means must now appear dim in Phnom Penh, and Cambodian leaders probably accept that a negotiated settlement will be necessary at some point in the future. The question is one of terms. If there are further serious military

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setbacks for the Cambodians, and if these are coupled with wavering American and ARVN military commitments, any avenue of escape from further casualties and destruction may look appealing to the Cambodian leadership. And if Hanoi were to find it expedient at such a moment to offer a proposition that left the Cambodians at least a semblance of national independence, the appeal might prove overwhelming.

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